

**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Homeland Security  
Hearing on the WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act of 2011  
June 23, 2011  
Statement from Senator Jim Talent  
Vice Chairman  
Bipartisan WMD Terrorism Research Center  
(WMD Center)**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members, I am speaking today as the Vice Chairman of the Bipartisan WMD Terrorism Research Center, better known as the WMD Center. Even though former Senator Bob Graham (D-FL), the chairman of the WMD Center could not be here today, please consider this our joint statement.

The WMD Center is a not-for-profit research and educational organization that Senator Graham and I founded, along with Colonel Randy Larsen, USAF (ret), at the conclusion of the Congressional Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism (WMD Commission) in 2010.

### **WMD Commission**

In early 2008, the Commission was tasked by Congress to assess the risk of WMD terrorism and to recommend steps to prevent a successful WMD attack on the United States. During its tenure, the WMD Commission interviewed hundreds of experts and reviewed thousands of pages of research and testimony. Each commissioner quickly realized that the United States was facing a growing threat of biological terrorism—a conclusion that was unexpected for many. We learned that the lethality of a sophisticated biological weapon could rival the lethality of a Hiroshima-sized bomb, and that the development and delivery of such a bioweapon would require far less money and technical expertise than a nuclear weapon.

In the commission report, *World at Risk*, we stated that terrorists are more likely to obtain and use a biological weapon than a nuclear weapon. In the late fall of 2008, we concluded that unless we act urgently and decisively, it was more likely than not that terrorists would use a weapon of mass destruction somewhere in the world by the end 2013. On December 2, 2008, the Director of National Intelligence publicly agreed with this assessment in a speech at Harvard University.

In an unprecedented act, Congress extended the authorization of the WMD Commission and assigned it a new task: to communicate its assessment, explain the evidence behind it, and to work with Congress and the Administration to enact the Commission's recommendations. In other words, we were charged with encouraging Congress and the Administration to take decisive action to prevent such an act of mass lethality from taking place on American soil, and should such an attack occur, to limit its consequences.

In 2009, we worked closely with Congress and the Administration to focus on the threat of bioterrorism. As our second year of work drew to a close, we released a report card that assessed progress on a wide range of WMD issues; however, the grade that garnered the most attention in the January 2010 report was the failing grade for America's preparedness to respond to a biological attack.

## **The WMD Center and its Bio-response Report Card**

We founded the WMD Center to serve as an honest broker between government and the American public to ensure individual, community, and national progress in strengthening the nation's capabilities to respond to biological threats. Our first major research project, scheduled for completion in mid-October, is a report card focused solely on America's capability to respond to a large-scale biological event, whether man-made or naturally-occurring.

Lynne Kidder, the President of the WMD Center, is leading a highly qualified team of experts in this study. During Phase I, our project's board of advisors were charged with designing the metrics for evaluating bio-response capabilities. Advisors include a former Deputy Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, the former Chief Counsel at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the former Special Assistant to the President for Biodefense (in the Clinton and Bush Administrations), the Founding President of the Albert B. Sabin Vaccine Institute, the Director of Disaster Medicine at the American Medical Association, and the Director of RAND Health. (A complete list of advisors is available at [www.wmdcenter.org](http://www.wmdcenter.org)).

In Phase II of our study, a separate, independent team of subject matter experts will collect data and provide analysis in each of seven categories:

- *Detection and situational awareness*
- *Diagnosis and attribution*
- *Communicating actionable information*
- *Medical countermeasures (development and production of vaccines and therapeutics)*
- *Distributing/dispensing medical countermeasures*
- *Medical treatment and response*
- *Environmental remediation*

In order to ensure rigorous review and diverse perspectives, this second team includes experienced practitioners and thought leaders from academia, leading think tanks, former government officials, and private sector organizations that specialize in biodefense. These experts will provide their analyses and insights to the WMD Center Board of Directors, who will ultimately determine final grades, recommendations, and report content.

Our report card will be released in mid-October. It will consist of three parts: a review of the threat, an assessment of America's current capabilities to effectively respond to act of bioterrorism, and recommendations that will set us on the course to reach our goal: removing bioterrorism from the category of WMD. While we will never be able to remove nuclear weapons from the category of WMD, it *is* within our power to remove bioterrorism from the category.

Given the ubiquity of select agents readily found in nature and the rapid advances in biotechnology that allow non-state actors the capability to produce sophisticated bioweapons, a major part of our biodefense strategy must be based on building a level of preparedness that will effectively remove bioweapons from the category of WMD. An attack would still cause casualties, but it would not be of a magnitude that would change the course of history.

This is a realistic and achievable goal.

## **WMD Bill**

The WMD Center is not in the business of assigning grades to specific pieces of legislation; however, if we were in that business, this carefully-crafted, comprehensive bill would receive high marks. If all articles within this legislation were to become law, it would represent progress for America's biodefense capabilities.

We do understand the challenges of moving this legislation through the various committees and subcommittees that will claim oversight responsibility. It should be noted that the 9/11 Commission warned of the Byzantine jurisdictional assignment of congressional oversight of homeland security. In January 2010, the WMD Commission gave Congress a failing grade for the lack of response to its recommendation: "reform Congressional oversight to better address intelligence, homeland security, and crosscutting 21st century national security missions".

The WMD Center fully supports many of the provisions of the bipartisan bill you've introduced today. In particular, we support your call for the re-establishment of the position previously called, Special Assistant to the President for Biodefense. We are also pleased with other provisions that are consistent with WMD Commission recommendations, including requirements for:

- A national biodefense plan
- A national bio-surveillance strategy
- A comprehensive cross-cutting biodefense budget analysis
- A national intelligence strategy for countering biological threats
- Improvements in how the government communicates the threat of bioterrorism
- Improved detection capabilities
- First responder guidance on WMD
- Guidelines on environmental cleanup and restoration

## **The Road Ahead**

While we enthusiastically support this legislation, we also must ask, is it enough? This legislation will help move the nation toward the WMD Center's goal of removing bioterrorism from the category of WMD, but it will not get us all the way there. We will not reach this goal during the tenure of the 112th Congress, but rather, it will require a long-term commitment. We must ensure that the legislation and policies we enact today and each year forward lead us toward that goal.

It is difficult to envision improvement without appropriate leadership and organizational structure. The 2008 report of the Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield*, examined the “uneven performance of the federal government” during several post-cold war national security scenarios, from 9/11 to Katrina. The report concludes:

It is facile to blame all these regrettable outcomes on particular leaders and their policy choices. Leadership and judgment matter, to be sure, but as this Report demonstrates, no leader, no matter how strategically farsighted and talented as a manager, could have handled these issues without being hampered by the weaknesses of the current system.

While the WMD Center fully supports your call to re-establish the position of Special Assistant to the President for Biodefense, we understand that doing so will not fix all the deficiencies in leadership and organizational structure for America’s biodefense enterprise. These will be among the most important issues we consider in the assessment and recommendations of our report card.

We are fortunate to have the experience and wisdom of two dozen of America’s top biodefense and public health experts assisting our project, but we are also considering the findings of recent reports by the National Biological Science Board, the National Academies, the Defense Science Board, and others.

Senator Graham and I look forward to providing you our assessments and recommendations in October. While I can’t provide specific details today, I can predict that some of the recommendations will require neither authorization nor appropriations, and yet will provide significant improvements in capabilities. Other recommendations will require congressional authorization, and we know that will be challenging given multiple committees with jurisdiction. Some recommendations will require more funding – a huge challenge in this fiscal environment. We will talk about partnerships between the public and private sectors, and while that has been a great bumper sticker for the post 9/11 era, it has proven far more challenging to implement.

### **Multiple-Benefits**

The good news is that many of our recommendations will have multiple-benefits for our families and local communities, whether or not they experience a large-scale bioterrorist attack. Improvements in the rapid diagnosis of disease, the capability to quickly produce safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics, and increased surge capacity in our medical care systems will benefit us all – for we know with certainty that Mother Nature will present biological threats. These no-regret initiatives will be a great legacy for our children and grandchildren, and will also help keep America at the leading edge of the biotech revolution.

### **The Growing Threat of Bioterrorism**

Removing bioterrorism from the category of WMD will neither be quick nor easy, but it is vital to both America’s economic and national security. I would remind you that bin Laden had a background in construction. It shouldn’t be surprising that he chose to attack buildings in

America, because he understood what damage could be wrought by flying fully-fueled, wide body airplanes into those structures. Al Qaeda's new leader is just as determined to attack America. His formal training was in medicine and infectious disease—one more reason we worry about bioterrorism. But this is not just about al Qaeda.

If the FBI is correct in its assertion that Dr. Bruce Ivins was the sole perpetrator of the 2001 anthrax letter attacks, then a single individual with no training or experience in weaponizing pathogens, and using equipment readily available for purchase on the internet, was capable of producing high-quality, dry-powdered anthrax. The only difference between producing enough material for several envelopes and enough material to attack a city is just a matter of a few months production work in a laboratory, rather than the few hours of late night work cited by the FBI investigation.

The bottom line on the feasibility of bioterrorism is quite clear. Today, terrorists have ready access to pathogens, the capability to weaponize them, and the means to effectively dispense a biological weapon. There is no question on intent.

### **Removing Bioterrorism from the Category of WMD**

It is well within the capacity of our nation to address this threat. The issue here is less a question of resources or knowledge than it is one of leadership and purpose. Our nation must recognize that the danger of a bioattack against the American homeland is a high priority threat.

At the explicit request of the leaders of Congress, the WMD Commission recommended the steps necessary to defend the nation against that threat. The WMD Center report card will offer even more specific recommendations this fall. The question is the same as when the WMD Commission issued its first report in December 2008: Will our leaders take bold actions commensurate with the seriousness of this threat?